

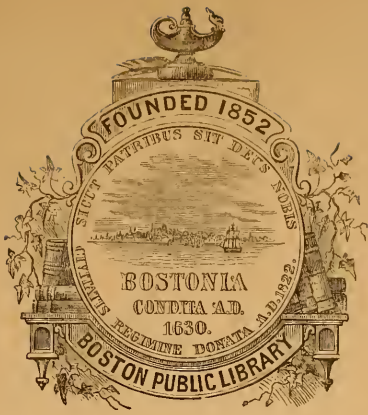
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EXPOSTULATORY LETTER
TO
GEORGE WASHINGTON.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

‘The vices of great men,’ says an eloquent writer, ‘are doubly enormous : enormous as they contradict the tenor of their lives—and enormous by the force of example and the species of palliation which they afford to vulgar criminals, whose vices are unredeemed by one single virtue.’

Unhappily, the faults of eminent men, owing to timidity or fear of plain dealing, are too often suffered to pass without rebuke ; until they become sacred as virtues in the estimation of loose moralists, and so included among the privileges of human action. He who imitates the prophet Nathan, in his faithful conduct towards the erring David, and tells the great transgressor of his crimes, subjects himself to the charge of impudence, malice, or slander. Nevertheless, ‘faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.’

Our WASHINGTON, of all men in modern times, is held up for imitation as the best model of excellence. His fame is, and doubtless will continue to be as long as our republic endures, perennial—ever widening—ever active. But he was guilty of a great sin, which, by his example, has resulted in the ruin of many immortal souls. Lest public admiration of his career run into idolatry, let it never be forgotten that he so far departed from the path of rectitude, and so directly falsified his professions of liberty, as to hold a large number of his fellow creatures in bondage as his property. To apply the rebuke of the celebrated O’Connell :

‘ Washington was a slave-owner all his life, and only emancipated his own slaves by his will: thus having had the use of slavery all his life, and paying this sole compliment to human liberty, that he condescended to allow its blessings to be enjoyed only when he could sustain no personal inconvenience from such enjoyment.’ * * *

‘ It is said Washington was educating his slaves into a fitness for freedom. But what!—was Washington then so unlucky as not to have succeeded in finishing the education of his slaves until just the day of his own death? Had the slaves a kind of lease for a life of inaptitude for freedom? and was that life precisely the life of Washington? What a precious absurdity! No; every good and every generous man should with me regret the one fault of Washington; but he should candidly admit that it was a deep, though I hope not a damning spot on his otherwise stainless purity and simple majesty of character.’ * *

‘ It is—it is with unfeigned regret, that I find one dark trait in his illustrious character. Nor should I have noticed it, but that my subject led to it; and that I deem it right to raise my humble voice to convince the haughty citizens of America, that the slaveholding states are held in abomination by all those whose opinions ought to be valuable. Man is the property of man in about one half of the American states: let them, therefore, not dare to prate of their institutions, or of their national freedom, while they hold their fellow-men in bondage. Of all men living, an American citizen, who is the owner of slaves, is the most despicable—he is a political hypocrite of the very worst description. The friends of humanity and liberty in Europe should join in one universal cry of shame on the American slaveholders. “Base wretches,” should we shout in chorus—“base wretches, how dare you profane the temple of national freedom, the sacred fane of republican rites, with the presence and the sufferings of human beings in chains and slavery.” * *

‘ Join with me, friends of freedom, friends of humanity, in consecrating to eternal infamy the owners of slaves in the Republic of North America. Nothing can justify—nor whilst I live, shall the example of Washington palliate their crimes. But let us ever cherish the virtues of the illustrious Bolivar, the greatest, in my opinion, and the purest of patriots, who began his career of liberty by giving freedom to seven hundred slaves which were his own property. Blush, virtuous Americans, at this contrast with your great and glorious Washington, who, I

repeat it, had slaves all his life, and only emancipated them as against his heirs.'

The following Letter, written in 1776 by an eminent philanthropist in Liverpool, is one of the most judicious and faithful appeals we have ever read. Its republication at the present time is specially needed, because a great multitude of southern oppressors are trying to hide themselves behind the example of Washington. It concedes to the 'Father of his Country' every thing which he deserves, but calmly and plainly rebukes him for his ONE GREAT CRIME. Although it was indignantly returned, may we not hope that its pungent truth sunk too deeply into his heart to be eradicated, and induced him, at his decease, three years afterwards, to manumit all his slaves ?

In July last, the following Letter was transmitted to the person to whom it is addressed, and a few weeks ago it was returned under cover without a syllable in reply. As children that are crammed with confectionary, have no relish for plain and wholesome food ; so men in power, who are seldom addressed but in the sweet tones of adulation, are apt to be disgusted with the plain and salutary language of truth. To offend was not the intention of the writer ; yet the President has evidently been irritated : this, however, is not a bad symptom—for irritation, causelessly excited, will frequently subside into shame ; and to use the language of the moralist, 'Where there is yet shame, there may in time be virtue.'

Liverpool, February 20, 1797.

LETTER TO GEORGE WASHINGTON.

It will generally be admitted, Sir, and perhaps with justice, that the great family of mankind were never more benefitted by the military abilities of any individual, than by those which you displayed during the memorable American contest. Your country was injured, your services were called for, you immediately arose, and after performing the most conspicuous part in that blood-stained tragedy, you again became a private citizen, and

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unambitiously retired to your farm. There was more of true greatness in this procedure than the modern world, at least, had ever beheld ; and while public virtue is venerated by your countrymen, a conduct so exalted will not be forgotten. The effects which your revolution will have upon the world are incalculable. By the flame which you have kindled, every oppressed nation will be enabled to perceive its fetters ; and when man once knows that he is enslaved, the business of emancipation is half performed. France has already burst her shackles, neighboring nations will in time prepare, and another half century may behold the present besotted Europe without a Peer, without a Hierarchy, and without a Despot. If men were enlightened, revolutions would be bloodless ; but how are men to be enlightened, when it is the interest of governors to keep the governed in ignorance ? ‘ To enlighten men,’ says your old correspondent, Arthur Young, ‘ is to make them bad subjects.’ Hurricanes spread devastation ; yet hurricanes are not only transient, but give salubrity to the torrid regions, and are quickly followed by azure skies and calm sunshine. Revolutions, too, for a time, may produce turbulence ; yet revolutions clear the political atmosphere, and contribute greatly to the comfort and happiness of the human race. What you yourself have lived to witness in the United States, is sufficient to elucidate my position. In your rides along the banks of your favorite Potomac, in your frequent excursions through your own extensive grounds, how gratifying must be your sensations on beholding the animated scenery around you, and how pleasurable must be your feelings, on reflecting that your country is now an asylum for mankind : that her commerce, her agriculture, and her population, are greater than at any former period : and that this prosperity is the natural result of those rights which you defended against an abandoned cabinet, with all that ability which men, who unsheathe the sword in the cause of human nature, will, I trust, ever display. Where Liberty is, there man walks erect, and puts forth all his powers ; while Slavery, like a torpedo, benumbs the finest energies of the soul. But it is not to the Commander in Chief of the American forces, nor to the President of the United States, that I have aught to address ; my business is with George Washington, of Mount Vernon, in Virginia, a man who, notwithstanding his hatred of oppression and his ardent love of liberty, holds at this moment *hundreds* of his fellow beings in a state of abject bondage. Yes ! you, who conquered under the banners of freedom—you,

who are now the first magistrate of a free people, are (strange to relate) a slaveholder. That a Liverpool merchant should endeavor to enrich himself by such a business, is not a matter of surprise ; but that you, an enlightened character, strongly enamored of your own freedom—you, who, if the British forces had succeeded in the Eastern States, would have retired with a few congenial spirits, to the rude fastnesses of the Western wilderness, there to have enjoyed that blessing, without which a Paradise would be disgusting, and with which the most savage region is not without its charms ; that you, I say, should continue to be a slaveholder, a proprietor of human flesh and blood, creates in many of your British friends both astonishment and regret. You are a republican, an advocate for the dissemination of knowledge, and for universal justice :—where then are the arguments by which this shameless dereliction of principle can be supported ? Your friend Jefferson has endeavored to show that the negroes are an inferior order of beings ; but surely you will not have recourse to such a subterfuge. Your slaves, it may be urged, are well treated. That I deny—man can never be well treated who is deprived of his rights. They are well clothed, well fed, well lodged, &c. Feed me with ambrosia, and wash it down with nectar ; yet what are these, if Liberty be wanting ? You took up arms in defence of the rights of man. Your negroes are men :—where then are the rights of your negroes ? They have been inured to slavery, and are not fit for freedom. Thus it was said of the French ; but where is the man of unbiassed common sense, who will assert that the French republicans of the present day are not fit for freedom ? It has been said too by your apologists, that your feelings are inimical to slavery, and that you are induced to acquiesce in it at present, merely from motives of policy. The only true policy is justice ; and he who regards the consequences of an act, rather than the justice of it, gives no very exalted proof of the greatness of his character. But if your feelings be actually repugnant to slavery, then are you more culpable than the callous-hearted planter, who laughs at what he calls the pitiful whining of the abolitionists, because he believes slavery to be justifiable : while you persevere in a system which your conscience tells you to be wrong. If we call the man obdurate, who cannot perceive the atrociousness of slavery, what epithets does he deserve, who, while he does perceive its atrociousness, continues to be a proprietor of slaves ? Nor is it likely that your own unfortunate negroes are the only sufferers by your adhering

to this nefarious business ; consider the force of an example like yours, consider how many of the sable race may now be pining in bondage, merely, forsooth, because the President of the United States, who has the character of a wise and good man, does not see cause to discontinue the long established practice. Of all the slaveholders under Heaven, those of the United States appear to me the most reprehensible ; for man is never so truly odious as when he inflicts upon others that which he himself abominates.

When the cup of Slavery was presented to your countrymen, they rejected it with disdain, and appealed to the world in justification of their conduct ; yet such is the inconsistency of man, that thousands upon thousands of those very people, with yourself amongst the number, are now sedulously employed in holding the self-same bitter draught to the lips of their sable brethren. From men who are strongly attached to their own rights, and who have suffered much in their defence, one might have expected a scrupulous attention to the rights of others ; did not experience show, that when we ourselves are oppressed, we perceive it with a lynx's eye ; but when we become the oppressors, no noon-tide bats are blinder. Prosperity perhaps may make nations as well as individuals forget the distresses of other times ; yet surely the citizens of America, cannot so soon have forgotten the variety and extent of their own sufferings. When your country lay bruised by the iron hand of despotism, and you were compelled to retreat through the Jerseys with a handful of half naked followers,—when the bayonet of the mercenary glistened at your back, and Liberty seemed about to expire—when your farms were laid waste, your towns reduced to ashes, and your plains and woods were strewn with the mangled bodies of your brave defenders ; when these events were taking place, every breast could feel, and every tongue could execrate the sanguinary proceedings of Britain ; yet what the British were at that period, you are in a great degree at this—you are boastful of your own rights—you are violators of the rights of others, and you are stimulated by an insatiable rapacity, to a cruel and relentless oppression. If the wrongs which you now inflict be not so severe as those which were inflicted upon you, it is not because you are less inhuman than the British, but because the unhappy objects of your tyranny have not the power of resistance. In defending your own liberties, you undoubtedly suffered much ; yet if your negroes, emulating the spirited example of their masters, were to throw off the galling yoke, and,

retiring peaceably to some uninhabited part of the western region, were to resolve on Liberty or Death, what would be the conduct of southern planters on such an occasion? Nay, what would be your conduct? You who were 'born in a land of liberty,' who 'early learned its value,' you, who 'engaged in a perilous conflict to defend it,' you who, 'in a word, devoted the best years of your life to secure its permanent establishment in your own country, and whose anxious recollections, whose sympathetic feelings, and whose best wishes are irresistibly excited whenever in any country, you see an oppressed nation unfurl the banners of freedom,'* possessed of these energetic sentiments, what would be your conduct? Would you have the virtue to applaud so just and animating a movement as a revolt of your southern negroes? No! I fear both you and your countrymen would rather imitate the cold blooded British Cabinet, and to gratify your own sordid views, would scatter among an unoffending people, terror, desolation, and death. Harsh as this conclusion may appear, it is warranted by your present practice; for the man who can boast of his own rights, yet hold two or three hundred of his fellow-beings in slavery, would not hesitate, in case of a revolt, to employ the most sanguinary means in his power, rather than forego that which the *truly* republican laws of his country are *pleased* to call his property. Shame! Shame! That man should be deemed the property of man, or that the name of Washington should be found among the list of such proprietors. Should these strictures be deemed severe or unmerited on your part, how comes it, that while in the northern and middle states, the exertions of the virtuous Quakers, and other philanthropists, have produced such regulations as must speedily eradicate every trace of slavery in that quarter; how comes it, that from you these humane efforts have never received the least countenance? If your mind have not sufficient firmness to do away that which is wrong the moment you perceive it to be such, one might have expected that a plan for ameliorating the evil would have met with your warmest support; but no such thing. The just example of a majority of the States, has had no visible effect upon you; and as to the men of Maryland, of Virginia, of the two Carolinas, of Georgia, and of Kentucky, they smile contemptuously at the idea of Ne-

* See the answer of the President of the United States to the address of the Minister Plenipotentiary of the French Republic, on his presenting the colors of France to the United States.

gro emancipation, and, with the State Constitutions in one hand, and the cow-skin in the other, exhibit to the world such a spectacle, as every real friend to Liberty must from his soul abominate.

‘ Then what is man, and what man seeing this,
 ‘ And having human feelings, does not blush
 ‘ And hang his head to think himself a man ? ’

Man does not readily perceive defects in what he has been accustomed to venerate ; hence it is that you have escaped those animadversions which your slave proprietorship has so long merited. For seven years you bravely fought the battles of your country, and contributed greatly to the establishment of her liberties ; yet you are a slaveholder ! You have been raised by your fellow-citizens to one of the most exalted situations upon earth, the first magistrate of a free people ; yet you are a slaveholder ! A majority of your countrymen have recently discovered that slavery is injustice, and are gradually abolishing the wrong ; yet you continue to be a slaveholder !— You are a firm believer, too, and your letters and speeches are replete with pious reflections on the Divine Being, Providence, &c. ; yet you are a slaveholder ! Oh ! Washington, ‘ ages to come will read with astonishment ’ that the man who was foremost to wrench the rights of America from the tyrannical grasp of Britain, was among the last to relinquish his own oppressive hold of poor and unoffending Negroes.

In the name of justice, what can induce you thus to tarnish you own well earned celebrity, and to impair the fair features of American liberty with so foul and indelible a blot ? Avarice is said to be the vice of age. Your slaves, old and young, male and female, father, mother and child, might in the estimation of a Virginia planter, be worth from fifteen to twenty thousand pounds. Now, Sir, are you sure that the unwillingness which you have shewn to liberate your negroes, does not proceed from some lurking pecuniary considerations ? If this be the case, and there are those who firmly believe it is, then there is no flesh left in your heart ; and present reputation, future fame, and all that is estimable among the virtuous, are, for a few thousand pieces of paltry yellow dirt, irremediably renounced.

EDWARD RUSHTON.

